

From Kant to Davidson

Philosophy and the idea
of the transcendental

Edited by Jeff Malpas

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Jeff Malpas

Introduction

The idea of the transcendental

Jeff Malpas

Of the ideas that make up the conceptual repertoire of philosophy, the idea of the transcendental, for all the history that attaches to it, has often been seen as having something particularly disreputable about it. Talk of the transcendental has come to be associated, in many contexts, with the speculative, the archly metaphysical and even the mystical; so-called ‘transcendental argument’ is viewed, in many circles, as either a fallacious mode of proof or else as inevitably dependent on verificationist or idealist premises. And suspicion of the transcendental is not restricted merely to those whose philosophical affinities are with the empiricist, anti-idealist traditions of twentieth century ‘analytic’ thought. For philosophers whose inclinations are towards a more pragmatist or historicist approach, the idea of the transcendental is often taken to be indicative of a universalist, ahistorical mode of philosophizing – one that strives to transcend the particularity of our factual situation.

In its original medieval usage, of course, the idea of the transcendental referred to concepts of being, unity, the good and so forth – the ‘transcendentals’ – that referred across the system of categories and so transcended any particular category. The way in which the idea has entered into philosophy over the last two hundred and fifty years is in a rather difference sense, however, one that, in its original form, was actually intended not to extend metaphysics, but rather properly to ground metaphysical inquiry and so also to limit it. It is this sense of the transcendental that we find elaborated in Kant. Indeed, in spite of the carelessness that is sometimes attributed to his use of the term, Kant is quite clear in distinguishing his ‘transcendental’ approach from that of speculative or dogmatic metaphysics, and explicitly characterizes the transcendental as referring to the structures that underpin the legitimate use of reason, and that therefore make possible ‘knowledge of experience’, as well as to that which concerns those structures, including the philosophical investigation of them. Thus, in the *Prolegomena*, Kant says of the term ‘transcendental’ that it ‘never means a reference to our knowledge of things, but only to the cognitive faculty’,¹ while in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant famously characterizes the transcendental, in similar vein, as that which ‘is occupied not so much with objects but rather with our mode of cognition of objects in so far as this is to be possible *a priori*’.² And while Kant does sometimes appear to employ the term ‘transcendental’ in ways that suggest

a conflation between ‘transcendental’ and ‘transcendent’, he also tries to mark out the difference between the two terms. He responds, for instance, to an apparently unsympathetic reviewer by commenting that:

[T]he word ‘transcendental’, the meaning of which is so often explained by me but not once grasped by my reviewer (so carelessly has he regarded everything), does not signify something passing beyond all experience but something that indeed precedes it *a priori*, but that is intended simply to make knowledge of experience possible. If these conceptions overstep experience, their employment is termed ‘transcendent’, which must be distinguished from the immanent use, that is, use restricted to experience.³

Moreover, if there is a tendency for apparent conflation to emerge, then it may be that this is partly due to the fact that Kant seems occasionally to designate something as ‘*transcendental*’, even though it involves the positing of something ‘*transcendent*’, in virtue of the fact that the positing is itself a requirement of the structure of the possibility of knowledge.

The Kantian origins of the transcendental provide an essential starting point for any discussion of the idea of the transcendental as it has developed over the last two hundred years or so, since not only is the rise of the transcendental in recent philosophy largely a function of Kant’s appropriation of the term, but also because the Kantian origin of the term – and its Kantian transformation – is indeed so often ignored, overlooked or simply misunderstood. This is not to say that there is not plenty of room for divergence in reading Kant on the transcendental (and some of those divergences can be discerned in the essays gathered together here), but while it is commonplace to cite the Kantian characterization of the transcendental as that which concerns the *a priori* possibility of knowledge, only seldom is the inquiry into the nature of the transcendental taken much beyond this. In part, this seems to be due to a relative unreflectiveness, at least in much contemporary English-speaking philosophy, so far as issues of philosophical methodology are concerned. It may also be a result of the widespread tendency to view the transcendental, in fairly narrow terms, as primarily a mode of argument directed at the refutation of scepticism.⁴

As the essays contained in this volume ought to demonstrate, however, not only does the idea of the transcendental involve more than merely a style of argument, not only is it concerned with more than just the problem of scepticism, but it also brings questions concerning the very nature and possibility of philosophical inquiry to the fore. This is clearly the case with respect to Kant, and in the first chapter of this volume Camilla Serck-Hanssen explains the way in which the idea of the transcendental itself emerges in Kant’s early thought out of a set of explicitly methodological concerns relating to the dispute over the nature of living forces within German eighteenth-century thought. Juliet Floyd continues the engagement with Kant in the essay that makes up the second chapter of the volume, but while Serck-Hanssen explores the idea of the transcendental in Kant’s first published writing, Floyd looks at the way in which the

transcendental strategy is worked out in a later work, the *Critique of Judgment*, and with respect to a specific philosophical problem, the Humean attack on induction. An important feature of Floyd's discussion is the elaboration of a conception of the transcendental as a mode of philosophizing that aims not at finding some transcendental standpoint from which our epistemic and other practices can be legitimated, but rather at drawing attention to the concrete and contingent circumstances in which those practices arise and on which their possibility is based. Thus she suggests that the 'proper conception of the transcendental perspective is something more local, more parochial, more open-ended, and more contingent'.⁵ In this way, the Kantian response to the 'Humean condition', as set out in the third *Critique*, seems to be echoed in the work of more recent philosophers, notably Austin and Wittgenstein, but also, notwithstanding his own Humean sympathies, in the work of Quine.

As Floyd's discussion shows, the idea of the transcendental, while it may have its modern origins with Kant, certainly does not end there. Indeed, while Kant remains an influential presence in many of the discussions contained below, he is only occasionally the main focus of attention. In this respect, the chapters that make up this volume can be seen as tracing out some of the main pathways (although certainly not all) through which the idea of the transcendental has developed over the last two centuries. Thus Dermot Moran introduces us (in Chapter 3) to the Husserlian appropriation of the idea of the transcendental in the form of transcendental phenomenology. In what sometimes appears as a radicalization of Descartes by Kantian (or neo-Kantian) means, Husserl provides us with an example of transcendental philosophy that stands in stark contrast to the more modest idea of the transcendental that is suggested by Floyd. Given its explicitly idealist and even foundationalist character, the Husserlian position seems to provide us with something closer to the traditional conception of the transcendental and of transcendental philosophy. The contrast between the ambitious and the more modest conceptions of the transcendental that appears in the opening chapters of the volume, and that is exemplified in the contrast between the idealist transcendentalism of Husserl and the more limited conception of the transcendental suggested by Floyd as well as by Serck-Hanssen, is played out in a particularly interesting form in the contributions by myself, Steve Crowell and Mark Okrent that make up chapters 4, 5 and 6. Here the focus is on the idea of the transcendental as it appears in the thought of Husserl's most famous student, Martin Heidegger, and a theme that runs through all three of these chapters is the possibility of a form of transcendental philosophy that is indeed in keeping with a more modest conception of the transcendental, one that is compatible with the factual and even, in Okrent's presentation, the pragmatic, and that will allow of a response to the question of being, and so also the question of ground, that does not seek to reduce being to something other than being. In large part, these three chapters argue for a repositioning of the idea of the transcendental (a repositioning that, in some ways, would bring it into closer alignment with Kant), as well as of the notions of ground, of unity and limit, of the factual, and of the pragmatic, as they themselves stand in relation to the

transcendental. Moreover, inasmuch as the transcendental can itself be seen as a project aimed at achieving a certain sort of grounding, the issue at stake in these three chapters may be put in terms of a question: how is it possible to answer the question of ground once the commitment to traditional foundationalism has been abandoned?

Another angle on this question is provided, in Chapter 7, by Karsten Harries' examination of transcendental themes in the philosophy of Karl-Otto Apel. In Apel's work we encounter the transcendental as it has been transformed under the influence of the 'linguistic turn' that has been characteristic of so much twentieth-century thought, but which was, of course, prefigured, in the German tradition, by philosophers such as Herder and Hamman. But the linguistic transformation of philosophy, and of the transcendental, brings into sharp relief the apparent tension between the desire of transcendental reflection, in whatever domain it operates, to arrive at an account of the *a priori* conditions in which that domain is grounded, and the need for any such grounding, if it is to be meaningful, to be related back to our own historical situation, to be articulated in our own parochial tongue. As Harries makes clear, this problem is evident in Apel's own work, but it also constitutes an inevitable limit to all transcendental reflection. The limits, or perhaps the tensions, within the idea of the transcendental, and within the transcendental as a mode of philosophizing, are explored from a different perspective in Claire Colebrook's discussion, in Chapter 8, of the transcendental as it appears in the work of Jacques Derrida. Inasmuch as philosophy is essentially constituted by its 'transcendental' character, so the inquiry into the character of the transcendental is, for Derrida, also an exploration of the nature, limits and contradictions of philosophy as such, and to this end he introduces the notion of the 'quasi-transcendental' (a term that also appears in Harries' discussion of Apel, though in a different sense) to designate that on which the transcendental itself relies and which is determinative of it. Moreover, while Derrida is indeed concerned to explore the extent to which the transcendental is itself dependent on the 'quasi-transcendental', his own deconstructive approach can nevertheless be seen as a development out of, and so as continuous with, the transcendental mode of thought associated with phenomenology.

Discussion of the transcendental is not, of course, restricted just to philosophers working with German or French thought. Juliet Floyd, for instance, is quite explicit, as we saw above, in drawing parallels between the transcendental approach adopted by Kant in relation to Hume and the approaches to be found in more recent philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Quine. Harries, too, draws on a range of philosophers, including Wittgenstein,⁶ while Okrent's pragmatist emphasis is suggestive of another line of connection. The final four chapters of the volume (chapters 9, 10, 11 and 12) focus more directly on transcendental themes in the work of philosophers from outside the Kantian, phenomenological or hermeneutic traditions. Thus, in Chapter 9, Bruce Fraser examines the tensions between Cartesian and naturalistic elements in Chomskyan linguistics, arguing that these tensions can only be avoided by looking to a more 'transcendental' model on which to base the Chomskyan programme. And although

Fraser does not do so himself, the arguments he presents regarding the possible superiority of a transcendental construal of the linguist's enterprise over a purely naturalistic reading are suggestive of a more general argument concerning the relation of the transcendental and the naturalistic. While he also returns us to Heidegger, Mark Wrathall takes as his main focus, in Chapter 10, John McDowell's treatment of a problem that is often taken as lying at the heart of the transcendental (and that is undoubtedly central to the Kantian problematic): the problem of transcendence, that is, the way in which the objects of perception (and, one might say, of mental states generally) transcend the mind. In McDowell this problem is essentially presented in terms of the relation between conceptual judgement and perceptual experience, and Wrathall contends that McDowell's treatment of this problem, according to which the 'gap' between concept and percept is overcome by making perception conceptual 'all the way down', is acceptable only by giving up on the demand that it be adequate to the actual phenomenology of perception. Wrathall argues, instead, for the superiority of an alternative approach derived from Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. The focus on McDowell continues in Anita Leirfall's discussion, in Chapter 11, of the apparently transcendental nature of McDowell's project, as initially characterized by McDowell himself, and the shift from such a transcendental orientation towards one that appears more 'epistemological'. The problem of the relation between mind and world that is taken up in the discussions of McDowell's work is also the focus of the concluding chapter in the volume. Donald Davidson has occasionally (and rather tentatively) characterized his own work in transcendental terms and a number of other philosophers, including myself, have argued for Kantian and transcendental elements as having an important role in Davidson's work. Focusing on the externalism that has become such a central feature of Davidson's more recent writings, Andrew Carpenter argues, in Chapter 12, for a reading of Davidson as employing a form of 'ambitious' transcendental argumentation based in the theory of radical interpretation and, in particular, in the Davidsonian idea of 'triangulation'. One of the interesting features of Carpenter's reading, however, is not merely that one might be able to find, in Davidson, a form of transcendental argumentation, but that Davidson's thought as a whole might be open to interpretation within a more Kantian transcendental frame. How might that change our understanding of the Davidsonian position, how might it change our understanding of externalism, how might it reflect on our reading of the transcendental in Kant's own work?

The idea that there might be a fruitful dialogue to be opened up through the exploration of a common transcendental orientation in thinkers such as Kant, Heidegger and even Davidson is one of the possibilities that is reinforced by the discussions in this volume. Indeed, it is notable the extent to which the transcendental so often provides a common frame within which otherwise quite disparate philosophers are brought together. Perhaps the idea of the transcendental, when given appropriate articulation, provides a philosophical and methodological framework that has the potential to bridge some of the divisions that have so bedevilled much recent philosophy. Of course, given the suspicion

of the transcendental referred to above, it may also be that it will only serve to mark out those divisions even more strongly. One of the main aims of this volume, however, is to encourage rethinking of the idea of the transcendental in ways that might enable us to retrieve the meaning and significance of that idea as it appears in Kant, as it is developed in a number of subsequent philosophers, and as it might apply across a range of philosophical styles and traditions. In some cases, this means paying closer attention to the idea of the transcendental as it is already acknowledged to be present in the work of thinkers such as Kant and Heidegger; in some cases, it involves showing how the idea of the transcendental remains alive, perhaps contrary to appearances, in the work of contemporary thinkers (of whom Davidson is perhaps the most obvious and important example). In these respects, the present volume can be seen as attempting a certain ‘reclamation’ of the idea of the transcendental from the misunderstanding, obscurity and hostility that seems so often to have surrounded it. Strictly speaking, however, such reclamation is not initiated with this volume, since it has already been under way in the work of many of the thinkers included or discussed in these pages. The aim of this volume is thus less one of reclamation than of drawing attention to the proper and distinctive character of the idea of the transcendental, and of a transcendental mode of philosophizing, as it is already present in the philosophizing of the last two centuries, and as it continues in the philosophizing of today – as it remains a theme in the work of philosophers from Kant to Davidson.

Notes

- 1 Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, trans. rev. Carus, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1950, p. 41 [Ak. 294].
- 2 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, A11–12/B25.
- 3 Kant, *Prolegomena*, p. 122n [Ak. 373].
- 4 This is not to say that an engagement with scepticism is not an important element in the Kantian project, but only that the direct refutation of scepticism cannot be viewed as its primary aim. In this respect, it is important to distinguish Kant’s anti-idealism, as expressed most notably in the ‘Refutation of Idealism’, from his anti-scepticism.
- 5 See Juliet Floyd, ‘The Fact of Judgement’, Chapter 2 below.
- 6 Unfortunately, I was not able to include Marcelo Stamm’s projected discussion of transcendental elements in Wittgenstein (‘Deduction and Dialectic: Transcendental Reasoning in Wittgenstein’). Clearly this is an issue deserving of much more consideration than is provided in this volume.